

Reading Films

"Moving pictures" began to spread throughout North America early in the twentieth century. The earliest movie theatres were converted stores with hard wooden benches and a bed sheet for a screen. These "theatres" came to be known as nickelodeons as the admission price was five cents. The films were short. In 1906, the average length of a film was five to ten minutes. In 1911, the earliest cinema music was played on tinkling pianos. During the silent film era, *Slapstick* comedy, which depends on broad physical action and pantomime for its effect rather than dialogue, was widely prevalent. In the 1930s, *Screwball* comedy became widely popular. It was laced with hyper action, was highly verbal, and noted for its wisecracks. In 1939, the first Drive-in theatre was opened on a ten-acre site at Camden, New Jersey.

Film as Art

Is a film a form of art? Someone said that film is the art form of our time that pulls in huge audiences of citizens as the ancient Athenian plays once did. But what is art? The history of the word "art" reveals a wealth of information about the structure of our civilization. It also shows continuous change. This is partially because cultures change through technology. Most people use the term "art" to describe the traditional fine arts, such as painting and sculpture, the symphony and opera. For popular music and television, we often use the term *entertainment*. "Movies are not *art*," an evangelical film critic argued, "Rather, they are a form of entertainment which employs artistic and communicative elements." But in *How To Read A Film*, James Monaco argues that, on a more advanced level, film is considered a sophisticated art, possibly the most important art of the twentieth century with a rather complex form of history and practice.

The Church and the Movies

Ever since movies became a form of entertainment, churches have had to deal with it. For many years, Christians were warned against movie going. Many "fundamentalist" pastors forcefully exhorted, "When the Lord suddenly returns, would you want to meet Him in a theatre watching a worldly movie?" Reformed Christians were also exhorted not to attend movie theatres.

1. The Christian Reformed Church (CRC)

As early as 1908, the editor of *The Banner* complained, "Theatre going supports a class of people that frequently caters to the lowest taste of depraved humanity, actors and actresses and their employers." A general objection was that the movie industry as a whole tended to be "of the world", and thus against Christian values and the church – and, ultimately, against God's Kingdom. The CRC 1928 "*Report of the Committee on Worldly Amusements*" paid close attention to the question of worldliness in relation to the movies. The "*Report*" stopped short of calling the whole movie industry anti-Christian, but still issued severe warnings against attending movies. CRC Synod 1928 judged, "We do not hesitate to say that those who make a practice of attending the

theatre and who therefore cannot avoid witnessing lewdness, which it exhibits or suggests, are transgressors of the seventh commandment." In 1964, the CRC took another serious look at the movies. The CRC realized that its official stance and the practice of its members were at great variance, producing a "denominational schizophrenia and/or hypocrisy." In 1966, a major report "*The Film Arts and the Church*" was released. It differed substantially from the earlier studies. It initiated a new discussion on the inclusion of films – as a cultural expression – which must be claimed and restored by Christians. The Report was idealistic in hoping that members of the CRC would become discriminating and educated movie goers, reflecting on and discussing films as part of their cultural milieu. The review of movies in *The Banner* began in 1975, but faced strong opposition. But in time the Reformed doctrine of the antithesis became muted in the choice of movies made by CRC members.

2. The Protestant Reformed Church (PRC)

PRC was fervent in its denouncement of movies and movie attendance. PRC considers all acting as evil, as is the watching of acting on stage, in theatres, on television and on video. They do not fall into the area of Christian liberty. Dale Kuiper said, "Certainly the content of almost 100 percent of dramatic productions (movies, television programs, plays, skits, operas) place these things out of bounds for the Christian." But already in 1967, a writer noted that PRC practice did not match PRC principle: "When I was formerly an active pastor in a congregation, it was always a source of sad disappointment to me that so few of our young people could testify, when asked at confession of faith, that they had not indulged in the corruptions of the movie." And since 1969 and continuing until today, various pastors and professors lament that large numbers of PRC members watch movies, either in theatres, or more often on television.

3. Evangelicals

The *Barna Research Group* studies show that "born again Christians" have bought into the media technology as much as anyone. The Billy Graham organization's *Worldwide Pictures* made modest independent films to evangelize youth – *The Restless Ones* (1965), about teenage pregnancy; *A Thief in the Night* (1972), an end-times thriller; and the Nicky Cruz biopic: *The Cross and the Switchblade* (1970). A reporter dubbed them "religious tracts first, entertainment second." More recently, evangelicals produced new sci-films about the apocalypse, which critics claim are embarrassingly poor-quality (artistically flawed) productions marketed in the name of evangelism. As examples, they refer to the profitable *Left Behind* movies (2000,2002,2005).

The *Dallas Morning News* ran a story in 1998 about the growing number of Christians who advocated going to the movies, even R-rated ones. The reason? Evangelical filmmaker Dallas Jenkins said, "Non-Christians are just as capable of producing God-honoring and spiritually uplifting products as Christians are, and I've been as equally offended by a Christian's product as I've been moved by something from a non-Christian."

Evangelicals are now advocating "family friendly" movies. These movies tend to depict a world where all issues are plain and simple. Evildoers are destroyed, the virtuous rewarded. The "good" characters have within themselves everything they need to secure their destiny. To help Christian families, evangelicals founded an organization in 1986 "to alert families to the decline in the moral content of movies" as well as to "persuade filmmakers to produce more acceptable movies." It publishes *Preview Family Movies* and *TV Review* twice a month, "offering reviews of current films from a Christian perspective."

Perspectives

A film is more than a form of entertainment. It propagates a worldview. When we watch a film, we see it only as the filmmaker wants us to see it. Each film reflects a message. In fact, ideological propositions can make their way even in popular art works. For example, the characterization and storyline in D.W. Griffith's classic 1915 silent film, *The Birth of a Nation*, portrays the racist assumption that white people are superior to black people. The Academy-Award winner, *Rocky* (1976), is a celebration of the American dream, a rags-to-riches tale. Rocky only has to believe in himself in order to pull himself up by his proverbial bootstraps and ascend from rags to riches. A clear contemporary example is Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, which is sheer propaganda. Mr. Gore has even the gall to claim there are no credible scientists who are able to refute catastrophic man-made climate change. To question the thesis of his film is considered heretical. His apocalyptic exaggerations are even force-fed to public school students in Canada. And all this in a postmodern age, which rejects absolute truth. How ironic!

The Titanic

Most films depict a world in which God is absent or non-existent. For example, there is nothing in the film, *Titanic* (1997), to suggest that God is even interested in the fate of those on board the ship. Whether uncaring or impotent, God is irrelevant in the world of this film. In *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture*, Romanowski comments, "Whatever outward appearances of belief dot the landscape of Titanic, they have little bearing on the faith of the main characters, especially when compared to the film's glorification of the human will and spirit." In this film, Rose's fiancé, Cal Hockley, is concerned only with approval of his social set. He equates wealth and social status with worth and character. Aware of the limited life boat capacity, Rose says, "Half the people on the ship are going to die." The snobbish Cal responds, "Not the better half." These attitudes run against the grain of American values associated with freedom and equality. In opposition to Cal, free-spirited artist, Jack, is the ultimate expression of pure freedom. His character traits, talent, and good looks easily identify him as the hero. Rose and Jack's illicit sexual encounter is for Rose a declaration of independence from her fiancé and her mother's control over her. The now famous sex scene sums up many of the film's themes: Forbidden love, class differences, and individual freedom.

Passion of Christ

Mel Gibson's *Passion of Christ* was recommended highly even by evangelicals for its realistic portrayal of Christ's suffering and death. But how true to the Gospels is the film? Why did the director have Jesus stand up to invite more scourging by the Roman soldiers? Is the film historically accurate or is it a reflection of Gibson's theology? As co-screenwriter, Mel Gibson said that he relied not only on the New Testament but also on the writings of two nuns, Mary of Agreda, a seventeenth-century aristocrat, and Anne Catherine Emmerich, an early nineteenth-century stigmatic.

The violence in the film became a matter of debate. On the one hand, the head of an evangelical youth ministry said, "This isn't violence for violence's sake. This is what really happened, what it would have been like to have been there in person to see Jesus crucified." On the other hand, many critics cringed at the level of violence in the movie. Romanowski comments, "In my estimation, it is difficult to provide dramatic justification for some of the violence in the film."

Star Wars

One of the most controversial film series was *Star Wars* (SW). In 1977, it hit the big screens. It was an immediate success. Legions of fans formed an eerie cult-like devotion and the box-office receipts were astronomical. It originated a new genre – the techno-splashy sci-fi soap opera. It has also a semi-religious theme. In *From Plato to Nato*, David Gress writes that the *Star Wars* film saga broadcast a popular mythology of heroism, growth, light and dark sides, wise old men and evil tempters concocted by the California filmmaker George Lucas. Much of the inspiration came from the teaching of Joseph Campbell, who claimed there is truth in all mythology. He wrote in 1955 that "clearly Christianity is opposed fundamentally and intrinsically to everything I am working and living for." In a survey of several hundred college students, researchers discovered that "scientific media" was listed as a source of occult beliefs. They cited such films as *The Exorcist* and *Star Wars* (*Magic, Witchcraft, and Religion: An Anthropological Study of the Supernatural*). In *The Argument Culture*, Deborah Tannen calls SW contemporary adventure films. She writes that with a stirring finale in which Han Solo, having professed no interest in or taste for battle, returns at the last moment to destroy the enemy and save the day. And there is a theologian on hand who can find something redemptive in SW. John C. McDowell, Lecturer in Systematic Theology at New College, University of Edinburgh, analyzes the "classic trilogy", *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and the *Return of Jedis*, in his book, *The Gospel according to Star Wars: Faith, Hope, and the Force*. He calls these films a "pop-culture phenomenon" of unprecedented stature. He says that SW is much more than entertainment. He believes that many critics and fans alike miss this, perhaps they do not know how to approach the complex relation of these movies and popular culture. He also makes some extravagant claims. He suggests that SW carries even "more influence among young adults than the traditional religious myths of our culture." He argues that SW possesses rich resources to change and transform us as moral subjects by helping us in some measure to encounter the deep mystery of what it means to be truly human. He even claims that SW is "a parabolic resource that reveals something of the shape of a Christian discipleship lived under the shadow of the cross." He notes that the theology

of SW is difficult to pin down – as it should be. However, its theological interests will be missed by those of us who find it difficult to discern divine wisdom diffused throughout God's world . But the interconnectedness of all life does seem to be *the fruit of the Force* in some way and is therefore exalted as the movies' "Good". In SW there is a distinctive echo of the theme of God's creative blessing on the delicate balance of interconnected created life. Yet McDowell says that the image of the Force lacks a theology of creation that can proclaim all life is good and valuable. He also discovers pacifist themes. According to him, SW, at its best, possesses radical potential to witness to a set of nonviolent values.

Critical Assessment

Should we warn Christians about the kind of movies they are watching, whether in a theatre or on TV? Some say, "they are only movies. They won't influence us." But no film should be viewed simply for viewing sake or because there is nothing better to do. Films often exalt self-interest as the supreme value, glorify violent resolutions to problems, and finding the perfect mate, one's primary vocation and highest destiny. They promote a view of romantic love which is passionate and irresistible and can conquer anything, including barriers of social class, age, race and ethnicity, and personality conflicts. But the love it portrays is usually another euphemism for lust. In *Images of Man: a critique of the contemporary cinema*, Donald J. Drew observes that in contemporary films, the context makes it clear that love equals sex plus nothing.

An underlying assumption in mainstream Hollywood films is that the goal in life is to become rich, and acquiring things even supposed to make you a better person! But the values of consumerism, like self-indulgence and immediate gratification, can harm individuals, families, and communities. *Time* film critic, Richard Corliss, notes, "For decades, America has embraced a baffling contradiction. The majority of its people are churchgoing Christians, many of them evangelical. Yet its mainstream pop culture, especially film, is secular at best, often raw and irreligious." I wonder whether the lack of critical thinking by evangelicals is the result of the tendency to privatize faith, confining religious beliefs to personal morality, family, and local congregation, while conducting their affairs in business, politics, education, social life, and the arts much like everything else.

Aren't even many Christians overlooking the persistence of evil in human history? Carl F. Henry observed that it is a widespread belief "that American people are essentially good at heart in a world whose inhabitants are prone to evil." We live in a fallen world that is at once hostile to God and also in search of God. Works of art can glorify God – including film art – but they can also be instrumental in leading people away from Him. Ever since the fall, human beings have been in revolt against God, turning their gifts against the Giver. Art, along with nearly every human faculty, has been tainted by the fall. Indeed, one of the first phases of the disintegration brought by sin was the usurpation of art for the purpose of idolatry (Rom. 1:23).

Most people believe they are personally immune to what they see on the film screen or on TV. How do we grow in our faith? Not by watching and observing a steady diet of movies. We must restore the primacy and power of the Word of God. God gave us a book – the Bible – and not a movie. We should be critical in our thinking, and apply our Biblical worldview. The Scripture calls us to "test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil" (1 Thess. 5:1-22).

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